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# Christianitea: The Evolution of a Religious Identity on Tea Plantations in Darjeeling

Traci Spacek  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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# **Christianitea: The Evolution of a Religious Identity on Tea Plantations in Darjeeling**

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Religious Studies

Asia, India, West Bengal, Darjeeling

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**Abstract:**

This study investigates the evolution of a religious identity that stems from the broader identity of “migrant tea worker” on tea plantations in the hill areas of Darjeeling, West Bengal, India in November of 2012. The study was conducted in the villages of three tea gardens in the Darjeeling Himalaya: Singla valley on the North Tukvar Tea Estate, Mineral Springs, and Liza Hill Tea Plantations.

Religion is present in the lives of all inhabitants of the Darjeeling Hill areas and has a long and complex history with migration that has resulted in an undocumented and always evolving group of religious identities. This study presents these religious identities and attempts to track how they have changed and evolved by documenting observed individual and communal religious practices and conversion. The study largely focuses on the influence of Christianity in these villages, noting how it came into the areas, why and different stories and possible reasons for conversion.

The study utilizes Peter Connolly’s three-dimensional framework for the study of religion to try and represent, interpret, and compare different religious practices in different locations to ultimately expose the way religious identities have changed over time.

## **Acknowledgements**

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I owe so much to CB Rai for guiding me through the preliminaries of this research and also for being a support system for me while I was traveling alone and providing me with a lot of good contacts and information. And to his wife and family who made me feel at home when I was alone in a place so unfamiliar.

A special thanks to the CJ Sisters and of Singla, Benita from Mineral Springs and Mr. Benedict Rai from Liza Hill for giving me the comfort of a bed, a warm meal and a place to call home during the course of my research. And of course, thanks to all of my amazing subjects and friends I made along the way who allowed me into their homes to ask questions they weren't used to hearing, and for always offering a steaming cup of tea.

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## Introduction

The field of Religious Studies is a fairly new area of study stemming from prior studies such as comparative religion that has been established to create a three-dimensional representation of religion. Peter Connolly states that “the attraction of a dimensional theory arises itself from the desirability of depicting religions in a realistic way” and attempts to; one, represent different religions and cultures, two, to interpret them, and three, to create comparisons<sup>1</sup> The field of religious studies under a dimensional theory incorporates many fields of study into analysis such as politics, sociology, economics, and in the case of this specific research, notions of environment and physical location.

The three-dimensional theory approach encouraged me conduct research in three different locations as a way of drawing comparisons. This study investigates how historical, socio-economical, familial and communal influences create change and evolution of religious practice and conversion in a lived setting. A lived setting is a sphere that incorporates all regularly carried out activities, such as work and caring for a family. The theory will be applied as a framework for the structure of this study.

The purpose of this comparative study is to track the evolution of religion and religious practice on tea plantations with an emphasis on the impact of Christianity in the Darjeeling District of West Bengal, India in November, 2012. The research was conducted on three different tea gardens in the Darjeeling District: North Tukvar Tea Estate, Liza Hill, and Mineral Springs<sup>2</sup>, these locations will serve as the units of analysis. Singla Valley was the only village studied on the North Tukvar Tea Estate, so the paper will refer to Singla Valley when discussing the individuals on the plantation. This study will also refer to Darjeeling Municipality which is the main city area at the top of the hill.

A major theme of my research revolves around the concept of identity. This study takes the identity of “tea plantation worker”, which is generally examined through socio-economic lens, and locates what religious identities are present, how they came to be, what practices are associated with them and how they interact with each other. I examine the multifaceted concept of identity by examining religious headings and documenting what each heading implies for individuals and communities in a lived setting. The ultimate goal is to expose how over time many characteristics of religious and social life have been diffused under the identity of “tea plantation worker”, and to expose what is underneath.

The first two religions discussed are Hinduism and Buddhism and are discussed and analyzed in terms of religious practice and conversion. This section attempts to show how, after a history of migration and intermingling of Hindus and Buddhists onto the somewhat isolated location of Darjeeling District tea plantations has resulted in influence and fluidity among

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Connolly. *Approaches to the Study of Religion*. (Cassell: London Wellington House, (1999). Foreword X.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix

practices and practitioners. The purpose of this section is to present common threads of religious practice between Hindus and Buddhists that have been adopted on tea plantations so that I can then compare them to Christian practices as a way of uncovering the influence Christianity has had on these different plantations.

The most recent religious development in all tea plantations is Christianity. Christian influence and conversion has thrown a new identity and set of practices into the bubbling stew of religion. This study documents through case studies the different ways Christianity has entered North Tukvar, Liza Hill, and Mineral Springs with a mention of different conversion methods and stories. The section dedicated to Christianity also documents individual and community methods of practice. The Christian identity is broken down into Roman Catholic and Protestant<sup>3</sup>. Within this section lies a comparative analysis of how the individual evolution of Christianity in each plantation influences religious practice. The section ends with an observation of hidden tensions towards the Christian faith, and how these attitudes change and evolve as Christianity integrates itself into the community over time.

The study ends with an analysis of my findings which function as the interpretation aspect of the three-dimensional theory approach.

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<sup>3</sup> Protestant can be broken down into many different denominations, but for the purpose of this study I will simply refer to them as Protestant.

## A Bit of Background: History of Darjeeling Tea Plantations and Laborers

Darjeeling is the northern-most district of West Bengal, India and is bordered on the north by Sikkim, Bhutan on the East, and Nepal on the West. Darjeeling District is composed of three hill subdivisions; Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong and Siliguri in the plains. Darjeeling was originally a part of Sikkim, but by 1835 the East India Company gained possession of the Darjeeling district. In 1836, G.A. Lloyd and later in 1839, A. Campbell were appointed to deal with land application and development<sup>4</sup>. “The decision of the Company to develop Darjeeling as a hill resort gave an opportunity to neighbouring people to immigrate and take part in development. The original inhabitants, probably Lepchas, were rapidly outnumbered by settlers from Nepal”<sup>5</sup>.

At the time of development in Darjeeling the economic situation in Nepal was dire. Many Nepali immigrants were attracted to Darjeeling because of trade and business prospects, but the “main causes of rapid increase of population have been the development of the tea industry”<sup>6</sup>. The first experimental tea nurseries were opened between 1840 and 1850 followed 6 years later by a rapid increase and development of the tea industry<sup>7</sup>. The tea industry now encompasses 87 tea plantations. As for the socio-economic status of tea plantation workers specifically, they are reliant on tea plucking as a means of income and everyday life is a physical and mental struggle<sup>8</sup>. A large number of laborers on these plantations are illiterate, because they do not have time, funding, or access to education.

During the mass migration many different ethnic groups from Nepal settled into the hills and thus “Darjeeling is peculiar in respect to its people, language, physical features, customs and traditions, etc.”<sup>9</sup> There is no written documentation prior to migration on who initially inhabited the Darjeeling Hill areas, but most sources suggest that the Lepchas were settled there and practiced a type of ‘animistic’ religion. As Julie Dekens puts so well, ‘the migrants form a different and new cultural group, nourishing a regional identity crisis’ that bleeds over into religious identity as well<sup>10</sup>.

In Nepal, as in India, there is a long history of the caste system. The caste system migrated along with the Nepali’s and those who ended up in Darjeeling became known as *Pahadis* (hill people). The Brahmans and Chettris, the original dominant castes, were the ones to

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<sup>4</sup> Dick B. Dewan. *Education in the Darjeeling Hills: An Historical Survey: 1835-1985*. (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1991). 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Roshan Patrick Rai. *A Study of the Adequacy of the Plantation Labor Act, 1951 in Protecting the Interests and Promoting the Welfare of the Tea Plantation Workers in West Bengal, With Specific Reference to North Tukvar Tea Garden, Darjeeling*. (Centre for Research on New International Economic Order). 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Dewan, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Dekens. *Livelihood Change and Resilience Building: A Village Study from the Darjeeling Hills, Eastern Himalaya, India*. (Thesis: University of Manitoba, 2005). 83.



obtain the land and brought with them those of the low caste composed of Kami, Sarki, and Damai, to do the labor work. The result “was a simple but effective Caste system and tribal groups [known as *Janajatis*] were slotted into the middle.”<sup>11</sup>.

But for laborers on tea plantations, all castes are under the jurisdiction of the Tea management who are the legal land-holders, and in this way the caste system has been and is slowly breaking down because tea pluckers all have the same economic position. As a result, “new identities have been forged, new organizations set up...and everything is still in a considerable state of flux.”<sup>12</sup> The fluidity of new identities bleeds over into religious life and practice.

From my personal observations and conversations with locals on the studied tea plantations, an increase in education and the ever growing population of determined minority communities, specifically Christians, contributes to the disintegrating caste system on these tea plantations. As a result many religious identities and ancestral practices of worship were influenced by the merging of communities in the somewhat isolated regions of the Darjeeling hills. Yet, traces of the caste system can still be found in personal stories and the existing presence of the caste system underlies many tales of conversion.

Soon after the British of the East India Company gained control over Darjeeling, “the Christian missionaries found the door open to intrude into the region for their philanthropic activities.”<sup>13</sup> Around this time, in 1843, the first church in Darjeeling, St. Andrew’s Anglican Church, was constructed. Slowly other international mission groups from around the world began to migrate to India. In the case of Darjeeling, the Scottish missionaries were predominant at the time of British. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century many of these different protestant denominations decided to join efforts and on December 30, 1924 came together under “The United Church of Northern India” (U.C.N.I.).<sup>14</sup> This organization was established “with Evangelical, Medical and Educational outlook.”<sup>15</sup> There were and still are other Protestant groups working outside of the U.C.N.I.

In 1846 two Irish Loreto Sisters brought Catholicism to Darjeeling under the Patna diocese which was then transferred to the Calcutta archdiocese in 1886 under the Belgian Jesuits.

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<sup>11</sup> David N. Gellner. “Caste, Ethnicity and Inequality in Nepal”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42. No. 20 (May 19-25, 2007). 1823.

<sup>12</sup> Gellner 1823.

<sup>13</sup> Dewan, 25

<sup>14</sup> United Church of Northern India (U.N.I.C). *Historical Background*. <http://ucni.in/ucni/historical-background>. (June 11, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

After a long history transfer, the Darjeeling diocese was established on November 25, 1962 appointed under Bishop Eric Benjamin who served the diocese from 1962-1994.<sup>16</sup>

The presence of the Christian faith in the forms of both Catholicism and other Protestant denominations is growing on the tea plantations and in many cases alongside education and social work. On each plantation and, more specifically, in each village, Christianity has entered at different times and in different ways, such as through education facilities, missionaries, social workers. Overall, the religious make-up in many villages is changing and evolving and has yet to be studied separately and documented.

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<sup>16</sup> UCAN India: *Diocese of Darjeeling* 2012. <http://www.ucanindia.in/diocesan-directory/home/diocese/darjeeling/56/>

## Methodology

When I set out to conduct this research I initially wanted to focus on when and how Christianity entered tea plantations with an emphasis on conversion and the non-Christian perspective from community members. After researching the history of migration and the way social, economic, ethnic and other various factors influence the migrant identity, I realized that there was a lack of information and documentation on what role religion plays in this identity. I decided that I wanted to create a larger picture of the different religions and religious practices in a lived setting, with an emphasis on Christianity, to begin to locate religion in the same way that these other factors have been studied.

My methodology consisted mainly of interviews and participant observation. I also consulted literary as well as oral histories to place the study in a present context. I conducted research in three separate locations as a comparative study. The three locations were chosen on the loose criteria that they are, or were at some point in history, under the management of a tea plantation and have actively practicing Christian populations. The three locations were also chosen out of a matter of suggestion, convenience of transportation and the help of the members of the NGO DLR Prerna that I was working with.

Studying in three locations was extremely beneficial to the comparative component of my research, but moving around this much in the time span of less than a month severely limited the ground I was able to cover in each area. Due to time constraints in a lot of cases I was unable to conduct follow up interviews and as a result some of my data lacks detail and depth.

The interviews were semi-structured in that I did not have specific households of individuals in mind. I was usually guided by a local translator who would locate households of people they knew who practiced all different types of religions. The interviews were usually unscheduled, which did not pose too much of a problem because people were usually at home since it is not plucking season, but in some cases potential subjects to interview were away or busy. I documented the interviews in a field-journal in hand-written notes. Trying to listen, engage and write down information all at once proved challenging and restricted the amount of information and direct quotes gathered.

Most of my interviews were conducted with the help of a translator unless the subject spoke English. I found local translators on-site. Using local translators was helpful because they knew all of the people of the village and provided me with a broad scope of subjects that I may not have otherwise encountered. Also, people seemed more inclined to talk to me when I was travelling with a familiar face.

But, using a local translator found on-site also posed a lot of challenges. In some situations I was unable to find a translator or was confined to their time schedule since I had not coordinated with them in advance. At times the translation was not extremely clear and the amount of information I was able to communicate across or gather from the subject was not very

substantial. Furthermore, two of my translators were Catholics so their presence may have influenced the responses I received from people of other religions when asked about their perceptions of Christianity.

The participant observation portion of my research was conducted in homestays and being present for Church services, Bible study for children, and personal prayer. I lived with a Hindu family, a Catholic family and with the Catholic Sisters of St. Mary's school in Singla valley. Homestays allowed me to witness how religion is practiced in an everyday setting, such as prayers at meals and in-home worship.

## Briefly: Hinduism and Buddhism

Most will say that their community is made up of “mostly Hindus, then Christians, and then Buddhists”. When walking around a village most can point out “that’s a Hindu household” or “they are Buddhist” or even “they are Christian”. Everyone seems somewhat conscious of the religious identification of other families in their area. But by delving deeper these basic religious labels fall apart under the weight of personal stories and practices that make a seemingly obvious situation much more complex. A notion of environment and nature worship are also intertwined.

Hinduism does not have a concrete history and “there is no *one* phenomenon which could be called Hinduism... Hinduism is a rich variety of beliefs and practices.”<sup>17</sup> The Hindus in Singla, Liza Hill, and Mineral Springs all have specific ways of practicing, and some are more orthodox in their faith while others do not really practice much at all. From a series of individual cases two patterns arise that help to draw a picture of how Hinduism is practiced in the villages of tea gardens in the Darjeeling hills. The first is that the practice is based on personal worship of shrines, images, objects etc. and celebration of Hindu festivals more than any on a devout study of any Hindu scripture as it. Lack of scriptural study can be attributed both to a history of oral tradition as well as the high illiteracy rates in these areas and a lack of access to the literature, which in the Hindu tradition was created for Brahmin’s in Sanskrit so means many can’t read it anyways. In the Hindu world overall, scriptural study is not much of a tradition anymore except for a decreasing population of high castes<sup>18</sup>. The second is that most practitioners exhibit the worship that has been passed down from their ancestors and observed in a family setting.

Purung Chettri, who lives in Subandura village of Mineral Springs, is a devout Hindu who ties his practice to a family line that extends far back. Purung and his family are all Hindu’s, and he learned how to be a Hindu from his father and grandfather. Purung worships all kinds of gods and really likes to worship. In his house he has a *Bharal Khota*, which is a separate room used for sacred worship that can only be entered by himself and his family members. Inside of the *Bharal Khota* they worship three kinds of gods, but he is not permitted to say the name of the gods. For Purung, an important part of practicing Hinduism is fulfilling the needs and requests of all the gods which are to be conducted at different times. For example, when worshipping Shiva they offer alcohol “because he is the drunkest god”. For Purung, passing on his faith to his children has always been extremely important. Every day when his two sons were younger he would teach them about Hinduism to ensure that they would then also follow his faith<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Jeaneane D. Fowler. *Hinduism: Beliefs and Practices*. (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1997). Foreword XI.

<sup>18</sup> Danny Coyle edit, December 2, 2012

<sup>19</sup> Purung Chettri Interview with the author, transl. Basat Rai, Subandhura Village, Mineral Springs, November 20, 2012.

Like Purung Chettri, many Hindu families have their own personal space or shrine for worship<sup>20</sup>. In the village of Memdhura in Liza Hill it is also common to see a small shrine outside that is used for worship by the four or five surrounding houses. On each shrine you can find pictures or small statues depicting many different Hindu gods, no two shrines I saw were the exact same. Usually families do *puja* (the worship of a particular god) in the mornings and evenings by lighting incense and other offerings to their shrine.

In Memdhura a Hindu woman named Kamala Mothey has a shrine in a small room separate from the rest of the house above a bed covered by a curtain. The shrine is filled with pictures of Lakshmi and in the mornings she and her daughter, Rangita Mothey, who still lives at home do perform *puja* by lighting incense and an oil lamp. Kamala's religion was passed down from her ancestors and she claims that her passion is to spread Hinduism onto her children. She also loves to go to temple, but the closest temple in the area is Mahakal temple which is located in the city region of Darjeeling. It is not easy for those working and living in the somewhat isolated villages on the side of the hill to make it to the city for worship. Three years ago a crisp white Krishna temple surrounded by a lawn of mowed grass and manicured flowers was constructed in Memdhura, but Kamala says "I don't go because it is new and I don't have any habit to go."<sup>21</sup>

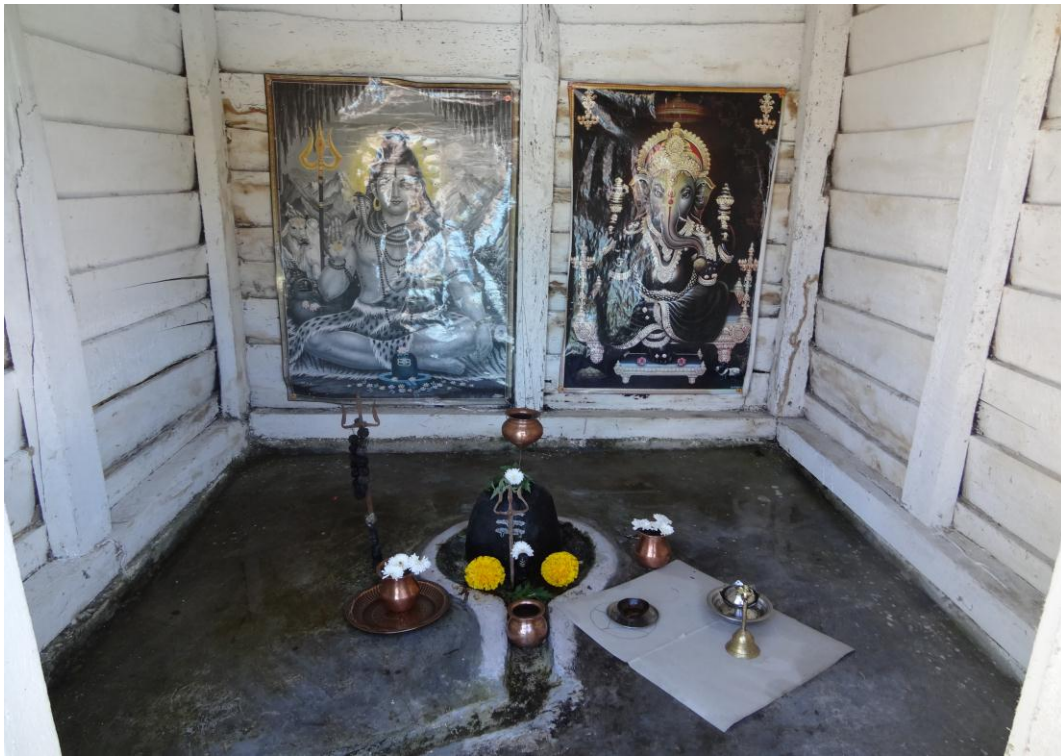
Kamala's story reveals a lot about the way that physical location affects one's practice. For many followers of both Buddhism and Hinduism in the hill areas of Darjeeling, the Mahakal temple is an important pilgrimage site, but many only visit once a year if at all due to proximity. Most of the roads leading to the city are poor and transportation to get there costs money and takes time. Usually household, family and work duties take priority over travelling to a temple to worship. Especially when it not only costs money to transport there, but takes time away from any attempt at earning money by plucking leaves or farming and harvesting crops to sell. Out of convenience most practitioners practice at home or with their community.

In Singla valley community prayer is one way that the Hindu population worships. Most days a select group of Hindu families will go to one another's houses to get together and worship for about 30-40 minutes and they rotate which house each time. Because Singla valley is quite large and everyone is working hard on their feet every day, the families take turns with the visits. Again the theme of location and proximity arise as defining features of worship.

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<sup>20</sup> Dictionary.com defines 'shrine' as a building or other shelter, often of a stately or sumptuous character, enclosing the remains or relics of a saint or other holy person and forming an object of religious veneration and pilgrimage. (dictionary.com)

<sup>21</sup> Kamala Mothey interview with the author, transl. Steffi, Memdhura Village, Liza Hill, November 26, 2012.



**A Small outdoor shrine in Ghuramdura Village, Mineral Springs**



**The Personal Shrine of Dhilip Kumar Rai of Basini Village near Memdhura Village. Very different from the shrine shown above, and also has both Buddhist and Hindu idols.**



The stories of Purung Chettri, Kamala Mothey and the villagers of Singla show that many practices are largely influenced by family tradition, location, community, and place little to no emphasis on studying scripture. The individuals rely more on personal worship at in-home or small local shrines.

These same factors influence much of the Buddhist community as well. All of the Buddhists I interviewed in the villages are Buddhist because their ancestors were Buddhists. As Yogesh Tamang, a Buddhist from Memdhura village, so blatantly put it, “I am following the same religion as my ancestors and that’s why it’s important”<sup>22</sup>

Like Hindus, most Buddhists rely on the small shrine or, in some cases a separate prayer room in the house to perform the daily offerings and worship. Yogesh Tamang has a small shrine in his living room with seven silver shiny bowls used for water offerings, which he fills in the morning and then again at night after lighting one large tall candle. Yogesh Tamang lives in a two room house and the shrine is located in the larger sitting room.

Since none of the villages have a monastery or location labeled specifically for communal worship, most offer and give worship to their personal shrines. Purung Tamang from Harsing village said that some in the Buddhist community are trying to build a monastery, but as of yet they do not have the funding and have not started construction<sup>23</sup>. There are many monasteries further up the hill closer to the Darjeeling Municipality, and Buddhists can also take pilgrimage at Mahakal Temple. But, as mentioned before, the physical proximity limits accessibility to these larger and more recognized places of worship.

These similar practices of both Hindus and Buddhists exemplify how living among one another in isolated areas of the Darjeeling tea plantations has evolved into a sharing of identities. Conversion through marriage is another way that Hindus and Buddhists adopt one another’s practices. Proselytizing has never been an agenda for Hindus or Buddhists, and specifically on tea plantations the migrant workers who label themselves as such have no interest in trying to bring along new followers. But, this does not mean that these populations are fixed or stagnant. Through the intermarriage of different castes and religions, people are crossing the invisible borders all the time and shifting the numbers.

In most cases the bride adopts the religion of her husband, but this does not mean that she loses all of her religious traditions. In the village of Aap Botey of Mineral Springs lives Gya Tshering, a self-identified Buddhist. Gya fell in love and asked for the hand of a Hindu woman. When they were married she converted to Buddhism, and at the wedding ceremony they called a

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<sup>22</sup> Yogesh Tamang interview, Memdhura Village, Liza Hill, November 26, 2012

<sup>23</sup> Purung Tamang Interview, trans. Duraj Rai, Harsing Village, Mineral Springs November 18, 2012



lama and performed other rituals for two to three days<sup>24</sup>. At the same moment his wife was declared a Buddhist, Gya Tshering was introduced to life in a Hindu family. When Gya Tshering's family in law performs Tikka he is given the colorful dot on his forehead and cannot say no<sup>25</sup>. If he refused his father-in-law would ask, "How come you can't take Tikka, but you can take my daughter?"<sup>26</sup>

Marriage became the pathway to conversion and integration of two different religious identities and set of practices. Then Gya Tshering and his wife gave birth to six children and from birth these kids were exposed to all the elements and family-specific experiences of both religious communities. The nature of marital conversion is fluid in the sense that changing ones religious status does not necessarily mean losing traditions and practices from the previous religion. In cases like Gya's, intermarriage becomes the vehicle for how religious practices evolve and are shared throughout the community. The latest addition to religious practice is Christianity.

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<sup>25</sup> Tikka is a Hindu mark worn every day or on special religious holidays

<sup>26</sup> Gya Tshering Interview, transl. Duraj Rai, Aap Botey, Mineral Springs, November 19, 2012.

## **A History of Christianity and Christian Conversion: Three Case Studies**

The presence of Christianity and Christian conversion in many of these villages is becoming more and more prevalent every year. Christianity is still considered a minority under the Government of West Bengal, but there is an ongoing establishment of churches of different denominations and the population of church-goers, especially over that last 20 years, has increased significantly.

The timing of Christian appearance depends on each village, but between the three locations studied, there are similarities amongst how the Christian faith entered. The two main vehicles driving Christianity into the winding switchbacks of the Darjeeling hills are missionaries and social work with an emphasis on education.

Conversion to the Christian faith can be attributed to many different aspects of one's individual life and come from both in and outside the villages. The main motives for Christian conversion identified through research are; provision of social welfare work with an emphasis on educational institutions, an escape from the caste system, the search for a stricter practice and a strong spiritual connection to God, as well as the availability of a community. Three case studies are presented from each village to exemplify how the evolution of Christianity is different in each village, but also to trace the patterns that arise.

### *Singla Valley*

Christianity came to Singla valley through both missionary work and education. Protestant missionaries came at least 50 years ago and there are currently many protestant groups practicing and five small churches scattered throughout the valley<sup>27</sup>. Roman Catholicism arrived much later in the form of two Congregation Jesu (CJ) Sisters from other parts of India to perform social welfare work and ended up starting St. Mary's school. A Roman Catholic Church was then constructed about ten years later.<sup>28</sup>

The founding of St. Mary's school provides an interesting history of a relationship of Christian social work from outside of Darjeeling with the tea laborers on a tea plantation in Darjeeling. The history and current role of the school reveals a factor of conversion associated with social work that attracts followers to the Christian faith.

In 1991 the Jesuit Fathers invited the Congregation Jesu sisters to work in Singla valley and that year sent two Sisters, one a social worker and one a nurse, to live and help within the community. "During this time the local people requested that their children be educated. In response the Sisters set up a temporary building and thus in 1993 St. Mary's school was started." There is also a government school house in Singla located about ten minutes from St. Mary's, but the facilities are run-down and the school only covers primary level education.

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<sup>27</sup> Father Pappadil interview, Darjeeling Municipality, November 29, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> *St. Mary's School* <http://www.stmaryssingla.com/about-school.html>

Economic income for laborers on tea gardens is minimal and due to the constant necessity for more revenue, some families were hesitant to send their children, valuable workers, off to school. The tea workers only make 90 rupees a day (and were just increased from 60 rupees a day last year) which is barely enough, and in some cases not enough money, to feed their families, let alone send a child to school. But, the Sisters were insistent on the importance of education and soon building a proper school facility became the main priority of their social work in the area. As it were, “with the majority of the students not being able to pay any school fees the sisters approached the Jesuit Fathers who agreed to help” and with the support of the Education Sponsorship of Asia the school building was inaugurated on October 19, 1987. Over the years the school has faced many hardships pertaining to expansion, an increasing student population and a lack of funding.

The monthly fee to attend the school is 85 rupees per month for primary school and 115 rupees month for secondary. Not all students pay full price and many have outside sponsors and the school also has a hostel for girls which can accommodate up to 40 students. The school is run by Sister Anupa CJ, with help of two other Sisters, and employs four local teachers. During the holiday season, which begins at the end of December and lasts until early March, the Sisters spend time preparing for the following year, budgeting and looking for more outside funding<sup>29</sup>.

St. Mary’s does not claim to have any religious affiliation or to participate in any direct form of conversion. The Sisters make it known that “we teach values not religion, we cannot impose on religion that is their choice.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, the presence of the Sisters back at the implementation of the school is directly correlated with the time when more conversion occurred and really took off in Singla. Sumitra, a teacher at St. Mary’s says that “most in Singla were Hindus and then Catholicism came slowly with the school in 1993- and from that time only”<sup>31</sup>.

The Catholic Church, named *Shanti ki Rani* in Nepali, which translates to “Queen of Peace Church”, was built in 2005. Prior to construction, the small congregation which consisted of only about three families at the time met in private sheds, the school building, or even houses<sup>32</sup>. The church now has close to 45-50 families.

The Father of the Church, Father Pappadil, claims that there were really no negative attitudes toward the opening of the Church from followers of other religions in the community. He explains that the Nepal community in general tends to be open minded in these cases, but also notes that “the school makes a big difference in their attitudes towards us” because St. Mary’s has been such a positive influence on the community and provides education for anyone from any religion.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Sister Vimla interview, Singla Valley, North Tukvar Tea Estate, November 7, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Sumitra interview Singla Valley, North Tukvar Tea Estate, November 7, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Father Pappadil, November 29, 2012.

*Shanti ki Rani* Church holds services every Sunday in Nepali language and Catechism classes for the children on Saturdays. Sunday is the only day that the tea laborers have off from plucking, so they have time to attend services. Besides Sunday mass, the community holds weekday prayers. The services are performed in Nepali by Father Pappadil who lives in the Darjeeling Municipality. Although Father Pappadil does not permanently reside in Singla, he has been a part of the Church since the very beginning and plays a strong role in the community. On Wednesday evenings, Father Pappadil drives down to Singla to attend these weekday prayers which are held in the houses of different members of the Church.

Because Singla covers such an extensive area of hilly land, and since the tea workers have to walk up and down along the rows of tea bushes every day, they switch houses every week out of convenience. During these evening sessions the literate members of the Church read Bible passages out loud and then they have group discussions and prayer. In this way, illiterate followers are still informed of the teachings and can incorporate them into their religious practice. Recently a small group of community members have been conducting this type of evening prayer group every week night.

Apart from community worship, individual and household prayer is also a present practice. Vidha, a local member of the Catholic community in Singla Valley, performs personal prayer every morning on his own. In the evening, he and his family thank God for the events of the whole day. On the walls of his two room house, Vidha has a cross and pictures of Jesus Christ posted to the walls. There is no separate space in the house dedicated for prayer or worship, but Vidha attends the Church every Sunday.

#### *Vidha's Conversion Story*

Vidha and his parents converted from Hinduism to Catholicism ten years ago. Prior to the conversion, Vidha was experiencing a lot of trouble at home. His father had become an alcoholic which resulted in a lot of fighting in the house. The family needed some help and they decided to go to Church to see if that might help. Vidha was attending St. Mary's school at the time and had learned some about Christianity in his first period catechism classes that used to be taught. After attending church for a while and learning about the faith, his parents decided to convert.

Vidha and his family were also drawn to the faith because they had always, as Hindus, been associated with a low caste and suffered many hardships. Christianity became a way of escaping an otherwise inherent identity as a low caste that came with a life of struggle and entering a community where everyone is equal.

Vidha never doubted his conversion because for him it is as simple as “whatever my parents follow I shall follow.” After their conversion Vidha’s father made a huge turn around and became a very nice person. His father passed away just last month<sup>33</sup>.

### Liza Hill

The history of how Christianity entered the villages of Liza Hill has many differences from Singla valley. Roman Catholicism came before any protestant missionaries arrived to spread the word of Jesus Christ. The Roman Catholic Church, *Our Lady of Lourdes*, was established in Memdhura Village in 1970. Instead of already-born Catholics coming from the outside to establish their faith in a small hill area, Our Lady of Lourdes was founded by two of Memdhura’s own villagers; Mr. Benedict Rai and his brother, Arpan Rai.

Back in 1966 the two brothers, who were around the age of twenty, were attending college in Darjeeling Municipality. At the time the two boys knew nothing of the Christian faith, coming from a Hindu family who also “worshipped trees and the river and snakes and idols, following the way of [their] ancestors.”<sup>34</sup> At college they befriended one boy who had been studying about Christianity, and Catholicism in particular. The boy started telling his friends about Jesus Christ and Mother Mary, asking them if they believed in God. When the boy asked Benedict Rai if he believed in God, Mr. Benedict said “Yes”. “Then who is he?” The boy asked, and Benedict Rai responded, “I don’t know.” The boy laughed. Benedict Rai wanted to know more, and eventually he and eight others, including Arpan, began following the boy and starting to learn about Jesus Christ with an emphasis on the importance of worshipping Mother Mary.

The young group of boys went searching for a church to join, and were approached by many in the Darjeeling city area, but they insisted upon worshipping Mother Mary and declined the propositions from requests of Protestant denominations who do not recognize her as a figure to praise. After a few years the boys were approached by a Bishop Eric Benjamin of the Roman Catholic Church and diocese of Darjeeling. Bishop Eric Benjamin shared their worship of Mother Mary, and the boys went to church with him and after a couple of years became baptized.

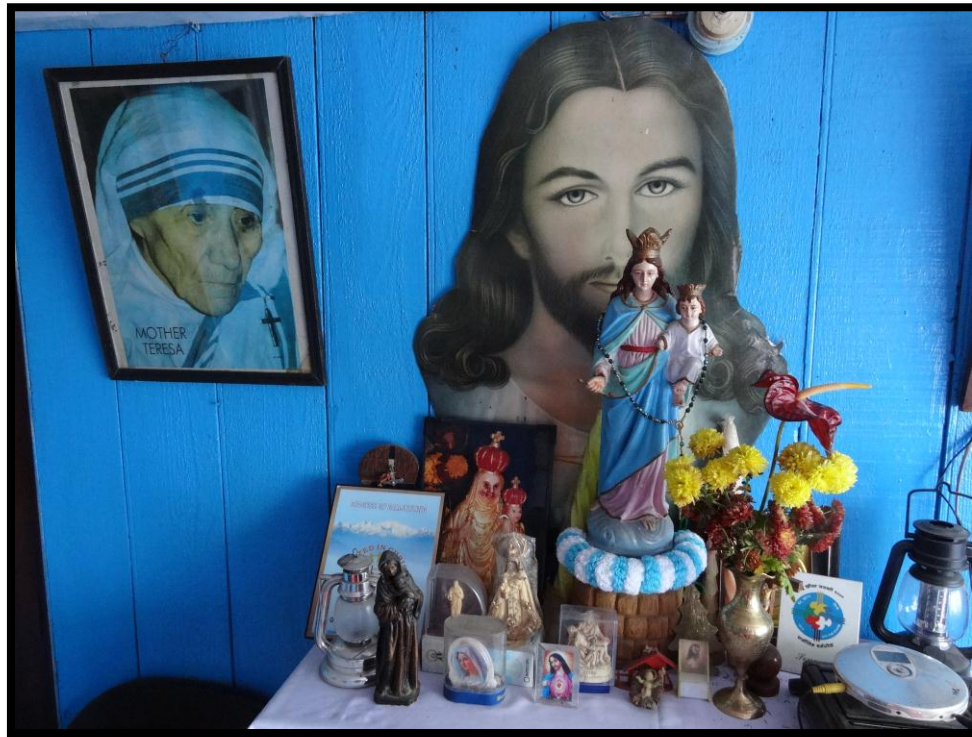
In 1969 Benedict and Arpan returned home to Memdhura as Catholics. They were the first Christians of Liza Hill and wanted to spread the faith to the rest of their community. Slowly the messages from the Bible that they had studied and learned back at college were introduced to the community. This was not so easy at first because many were hesitant to accept a new faith. Benedict Rai explained that during the 70s in this area there was quite a bit of religious intolerance. But, there were some who were interested in what the brothers had to say and with that they formed a small community of followers. To establish the new faith, the brothers decided it was important to construct a facility for their practice. In 1970, under their

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<sup>33</sup> Vidha interview, Singla Valley, North Tukvar Tea Estate, November 7, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Mr. Benedict Rai interview, Memdhura village, Liza Hill, November 23, 2012.

advisement, the first chapel was built in Liza Hill. The chapel was named *Our Lady of Lourdes* and the same building is still there today. When the church was first established, only four or five families were attending the services. Today there are over 70 families, and on Sundays every spot on the floor of the Church is occupied by a man bending on his knees to pray as he enters, or a woman in her nicest kurta, her children trying to sit still<sup>35</sup>.



### Alter for Worship in Benedict Rai's home in Memdhura village, Liza Hill

The Church holds services on Sunday mornings and people from all of the eight villages of Liza Hill walk to *Lady of Our Lourdes* church for mass. It is the only Catholic Church in Liza Hill, so those who belong must make the journey. One Sunday morning this November at nine a.m. all the families attending service trickled into the big wooden doors of the church to gather and wait for Father Alex to arrive, chatting amongst each other.

*Lady of Our Lourdes* has never had a permanent Father, every three or four years the man who conducts Sunday mass is replaced by a new face. For the last four years the Church services have been conducted by Father Alex, a teacher from Darjeeling Municipality. He comes every Sunday in the morning and leaves that afternoon. When I spoke to Father Alex he mentioned that he does not have a strong connection to most of the Church-goers, and is simply there to conduct the service.

<sup>35</sup> Mr. Benedict Rai interview, November 23, 2012.

The un-invested relationship with Father Alex may be attributed to the detail that Catholicism has always been associated with insiders of the community. In Liza Hill, Catholicism was brought to Memdhura by two of the local villagers and continued to spread by mouth from family member to family member and friend to friend. Unlike the case presented in Singla Valley, the Catholic community of Liza Hill has never really associated outside support with the Catholic faith. This may be the reason why they do not have a close relationship with Father Alex that the members of Singla have with Father Pappadil.

Yet there does exist a similarity between Liza Hill and Singla; the link between education and conversion. A landmark in the evolution of Catholicism in Memdhura came in 2006 with the opening of St. Ignatius School. In 1996 a small private primary school named Anugraha Academy was established, the school was only a primary school and was not very well run. In 2006 the school came under new ownership of a community member named Steffi who, with the help of her husband, took initiative to revamp the school and include a secondary section. The school had not done well before, and Steffi wanted to help provide an education for local village children.

St. Ignatius School has granted many of the children in the villages of Liza Hill access to secondary education. There are now 71 children attending St. Ignatius School and five local teachers. Getting a secondary education opens up doors to opportunities for children who would otherwise have no other option than to become tea plantation workers like their parents. Many children cannot afford to attend the school at full price, but Steffi has coordinated some outside sponsors to help pay for the children to attend.

Steffi is a converted Catholic with an interest in the teachings of St. Ignatius. She is strong in her Christian beliefs and when she and her husband took over the school Steffi decided that the school was going to be named “St. Ignatius School” and that, apart from the academic criteria, the students were going to be exposed to some teachings of Christianity as well, but it is not required that they be Christians.

Every morning before class the students line up by age group in tidy uniforms and sing Christian hymns, even if they are not Christian. In the school handbook it is stated that the children will have Bible study once a week and all parents have to agree to this. This is Steffi’s personal way of teaching about her faith and hopefully spreading it to some of the children. In this way children are introduced to the teachings of the Catholic faith<sup>36</sup>.

The case of St. Ignatius is both similar and different to the case of St. Mary’s school in Singla. Both schools were started by Catholics and provide education as a form of social welfare to benefit the community and provide opportunities for children born on tea plantations. In the case of St. Mary’s the conversion that followed the opening of the school was indirect, but was somewhat affiliated with the presence of education. Steffi essentially utilizes St. Ignatius school

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<sup>36</sup> Steffi interview, Memdhura village, Liza Hill, November 26, 2012.

time for evangelization purposes and the conversion is more direct. Still in both cases an introduction to Catholicism is associated with the provision of education.

### *Steffi's Conversion Story*

When Steffi was a young girl in school one of her teachers who was a Christian would take her to a church two hours from her home on some Sundays. When Steffi married at the age of 17 and was attending college with her husband. At the time she identified as Hindu, but believed in Christ was praying to Christ. At that time she and her husband were attending church.

Steffi officially converted 18 years ago. She had moved back to Memdhura after school and at the time she was unemployed and her husband became sick and no one was helping her. She had no support from her family members and no money. She decided to go to the Church and a prayer group came to her house and helped her pray for her husband. It was at that point that she and her husband decided to convert<sup>37</sup>.

### *Mineral Springs*

In Mineral Springs there is not educational system similar to Singla or Memdhura in Liza Hill. There are only two government schools and two private schools, but they are only primary schools and all the children leave the village to attend Secondary school. There is also currently no Catholicism in Mineral Springs. The exact date of when missionaries entered this area is unknown, but the first church of Mineral Springs was constructed by the U.C.N.I in Harsing village and established in 2005. On February 7, 2011, by request of the U.C.N.I, two missionaries, Bikas Rai and his wife from West Sikkim, were sent to Harsing to spread the faith. Bikas Rai and his wife converted from Hinduism in 2008 and have been conducting missionary work ever since.

When Bikas Rai and his wife first entered Harsing village they did not disclose the true nature of their mission. Back in February the couple would go to the houses of their neighbors and say that they just moved to the village and were looking for friends. After a while the proselytization process began and they started going door to door telling people about Christianity. The main message they spread is that "In the world there are many sins and you can find identity in Jesus Christ and he will love."<sup>38</sup> They have successfully spread the message to some villagers of the community. Lately, local converts and church members such as Milan Sewa have set out on proselytizing missions of their own to spread the faith to their community.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Bikas Rai Interview, Harsing Village, November 21, 2012.



Under the provision of the U.C.N.I, Bikas Rai and his wife also came to Harsing to provide food and shelter for the very poor. If members of the community are in very dire need of support, Bikas Rai will contact the head management of U.C.N.I in Darjeeling Municipality to send money to the village. Sometimes the funds from the head management are delayed so Bikas and his wife have to provide the money from pocket.



**U.C.N.I Church established in 2005 in Harsing Village.**

### *Milan Sewa's Conversion*

Milan Sewa was in the army and at the time of dispatch he was an alcoholic and his wife was nine months pregnant and suffering from liver jaundice. He was a Hindu and used to practice all of the rituals and he used to go to the Mahakal temple twice a year with his family, but he felt like something was missing and he could not seem to quit drinking. His drinking problem almost led to divorce and he tried to attempt suicide three times.

Milan's wife used to attend Sunday school and knew about Christ. She used to try and convert him, but he would just stare at her and try to slap her. Then one day in 1996 he met a man who shared a Bible verse with him and all of this sudden he decided that he was ready to convert. On September 16, 1996 Milan was baptized along with his whole family. Slowly he

started to quit drinking and his wife started recovering from health with the help of medicine and prayer. After he was baptized Milan began preaching to those who are drunk or sick and says that “his target is the virgin land where there are no Christians.” Every morning Milan and his wife wake up early and pray before work, and then after work he usually goes to preach to the nearest homes<sup>39</sup>.

### Common Themes

Each of these three case studies presents a history of Christian immersion and reveals that the evolution of Christianity and Christian conversion on tea plantations cannot be traced to specific dates and is still occurring today.

But, there are patterns that can be traced from these case studies. The first is a link between social welfare and conversion. In both Singla Valley and Liza Hill, education has indirect and somewhat direct links to conversion that do not stem necessarily from proselytization efforts but from the affiliation of the Catholic community to the distribution of social benefits. Tea plantation workers would not be otherwise provided with this type of education from the government, which is apparent from the dire state of the government primary school facilities that are in these areas. Purung Tamang, a Buddhist from Harsing who I mentioned earlier, said that “I like Christianity because they help the needy and the helpless. When people get help from Christian people, naturally they begin to believe the faith.” Even though it is impossible to create a direct link between social work and conversion, it seems that there is a general understanding amongst the community that this is a factor.

The second pattern is that although most cases begin with Christian influence from other international efforts, or even national efforts of India, the spread of the faith has started to grow within the community itself. This is most likely the most recent development of Christianity on tea plantations. Since the community members are so close and reliant on one another, it may be easier to believe in a faith that was introduced by your neighbors or even family members.

The purpose of including personal stories of conversion from each case study is also to note how the evolution of religion presents itself in an individual. All of the conversion stories point to a life full of hardship and from the caste system. Puring Tamang explained that, “Before, about ten to twenty years back, there was a caste system here so many of the lower caste went to Christianity to get out of the Caste system.” Purung said that people felt that they were finally getting some respect because Christianity is just. Purung also said about the caste system that “when people are educated and travel they find that the caste system is not good.”

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<sup>39</sup> Milan Sewa interview, Memdhura village, Liza Hill, November 18, 2012.

## Hidden Tensions

In each society every person I talked to told me that everyone from all different religions get along and that “all religions are the same”. Yet, a deeper analysis of attitudes towards Christianity and Christian conversion reveals glimpses of some inner tensions that exist.

At each location there are conversion stories that resulted, at least at the time, in opposition and sometimes abandonment from family members and friends. When Milan Sewa converted back in 1996 his family members told him not to come and visit because he was no longer one of them, no longer a Hindu. Some of his friends even told him “you are dead to us”. Milan explained that this is a common story among many of the new converts. Milan even used to share these feelings before his conversion. At the time Milan considered himself strong in his Hindu faith and did not like the Christians in his village; “I used to throw stones at them when they would do their fellowship.”<sup>40</sup>

When some of the Hindu families found out that the two missionaries, Bikas Rai and his wife, were in Harsing village to do missionary work, they would no longer allow the couple in their homes. Bikas Rai and his wife faced a lot of opposition from members of the community on the basis of their religion. During an interview in the church in Harsing village, Bikas disclosed that many of the families he considered friends before he began proselytizing would not even let him drink water from their glasses after they became aware of his agenda to proselytize. Multiple times Bikas Rai was confronted and accused of trying to convert family members.

In the village of Memdhura, a village a little further down the hill from Harsing, Carlina Puri, the principal of Balaji English School, says that “most people don’t like Christians”, but that this attitude is changing and in her school they are teaching the students that all religions are the same, and to respect them all. One teacher at her school converted to Christianity five years back and was ostracized by her family who opposed the conversion. So although these tensions are still present, they are slowly fading and evolving into a greater understanding of religious freedom and choice.

In Singla, when the school and church first appeared, there were some negative attitudes towards Christians and Christian conversion. Premika, a Catholic member of Singla, claims that “a lot of people were illiterate so they opposed outside religion”. Vidha, another Catholic member of Singla, explains that High Caste Hindu’s think Christians are of one of the lowest Caste, and those who are uneducated still follow this type of Casteism.

It is important to recognize here that the notion of being educated lacks any specific definition, and although these statements are broad they still reveal a tension between Hindus and Christians that was and is in the area. This is also telling of a type of evolution in the

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<sup>40</sup> Minal Sewa interview, November 18, 2012.

recognition that these attitudes are shifting. The attitudes may also stem from the desire on behalf of the Hindus to preserve their traditions and practices that have been passed down through so many generations. According to Milan Sewa, sometimes there are problems with conversion or people do not want to convert because Hindus and Buddhists have been following their faith from the beginning.

But these examples are not to imply that when you visit the villages Memdhura or Ghuramdhura, for example, you will not find a Hindu family perched outside of their front door glaring at the Christians in the church service on the other side of the rocky road. In most cases the negativity is impossible to decipher as an outsider and often there is not any at all. By documenting these attitudes I am simply trying to enforce how the different dimensions of religion, like the socio-political, not only affect religious practice but the community dynamic as a whole.

## Analysis

Overall the research presented reveals that identity is changing and shifting and melting together, while at the same time dividing apart among the different religious communities of the tea plantations studied.

There are some main differences between Christian and non-Christian practices which show how the evolution of Christianity is causing a new type of worship to enter the homes of the tea plantation workers. I found that most Hindus and Buddhists rely on a more ancestral and non-scripture based worship, while Christians tend to revolve a lot of their practice around Bible study. This is interesting to note because on the small isolated tea gardens family plays such an important role on how one identifies, and with the influence of Christianity we start to see this breakdown somewhat with a veering away from practices passed down through generations. The section on hidden tensions also reveals how Christianity can sometimes cause family ties to break because in some cases a Hindu family will not allow a member of their family who converted to come back home.

Along with scriptural study, the main difference for most Christians is the importance of having a physical building for community worship. In the case studies presented in Singla, Liza Hill and Mineral Springs, Christianity is served side-by-side with a Church for the members to attend every Sunday and possibly Saturdays for Bible study. Christians have small prayer rooms similar to Hindus and Buddhists with pictures of Jesus Christ hanging on their walls, but they also have an actual constructed location to meet. It may be because the Christians tend to be the ones with more access to funding to construct Churches, but also because the Hindu families do not necessarily associate their worship with a large communal building. For example, Kamala Mothey said that she did not have the habit to go to the new temple built in her village.

At the same time, in many ways we can see similarities in practice that are dependent on location. For example, in Singla the Hindus sometimes have community worship where they go around to one another's houses once a month. The Christian community at Singla also has these small prayer groups and moves from house to house because it is too far to always walk to the same house.

As far as conversion goes, the only type to exist before Christianity came to these villages was marital conversion as well as a general sharing of practices that resulted from living so close in proximity to one another. With the development of institutions provided by the Christian community and the proselytization from without and within the community, Christianity has spread and settled in these communities.

The hidden tensions that have resulted from an increase of conversion may be a reaction to the threat that the worship passed down from many generations which holds so much weight for religious identity is not up-kept when people convert.

**Conclusion:**

The migration of different castes, ethnicities and religion to the hill areas surrounding Darjeeling from the 1850's onward has evolved into a simmering pot combined of the flavors of co-existing families and individuals of many different religions. During years of living in a semi-isolated location these different religions have influenced one another and formed multiple identities. In Memdhura, Hindu families will call members of the Catholic Church to come over to celebrate Diwali. Christians on Christmas will go to all the houses of the village singing carols and passing out treats, regardless of what religion is practiced behind the door of the household. Although there are cases of adverse reaction between different religions, they are not necessarily based on lines of spiritual belief and are not meant to reflect negatively on the members of the communities studied.

Life as a tea plantation worker is full of hardships and physically straining work every single day. To manage a household, send a child through school, and even get the rations for the week can be challenging. The societies of workers rely strongly on their family and on one another for support and an escape from washing clothes, picking tea leaves, preparing dinner, going to school, taking exams, or taking care of their farm animals and orange trees. Religion just adds another complexity to the evolving identity and co-existence of the tea plantation worker.

## Appendix I

Mineral Springs, located on the Lebong Spur of Darjeeling-Jalapahar Range (Packet from Basat) has a bit of a different history. Mineral Springs, composed of three *Busties* (villages); Harsing, Dabaipani, and Yangkhoo, was established in 1864 as a tea garden under supervision of Harrison Tea Company (packet). In 1957 the factory of the tea garden burned down and the garden was closed. Mineral Springs was then reinstated until 1977 and land was redistributed. Over the past couple of decades with the help of local the local NGO, Darjeeling Ladenla Road Prerna (DLR Prerna), Mineral Springs has become a Small Farmer's Society known as *Mineral Spring Sanjukta Vikash Sanasthal (MSSVS)*. Nevertheless, most families still cultivate and sell tea as a means of income and are under indirect management of Selimbong Tea Garden under the Tea Promoters India Pvt Ltd. For the purpose of this paper the society members are referred to as tea plantation workers because of the history with Harrison Tea Company, the fact that many still cultivate tea for livelihood, and for the sake of the study. The small farmers of the Mineral Springs society have many differences from other tea plantation laborers that are not explored in this research.

## Appendix II

Tribal Status is another identity I explored and found extremely fascinating, but decided not to include in the body of the paper. Here is what I found, and I encourage future researchers to take this and run with it:

### *Adding a Tribal Identity to the Mix*

In the migrant communities that settled their way into the fields of tea bushes and small farms blossoming with orange trees and other crops are the population of Buddhists and Hindus who also have separate religious and ethnic ties to a Tribal history with individual worship practices. The elaborate story of both these groups illuminates the ways that religions influence one another and uncovers how political and economic status can determine change in religious practice.

Gaining recognition as a tribal community “can entitle a community to educational and economic benefits from the state on the basis of their unique cultural history and language.”<sup>41</sup> Post-Indian independence there was movements to organize all Nepali’s under one ethnic identity; the Gorkhas of “Gorkhaland” which was never recognized under the Government of West Bengal. In 1990 the Mandal Commission reinforced the government benefits for Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), or Other Backward Castes (OBC) and “for the first time, being a member of a scheduled Tribe or Caste could actually alter one’s educational or professional chances for the better.”<sup>42</sup>

In 2002 the Tamang community gained recognitions as an ST. For at least ten years the ethnic Rai community has been trying to mobilize and gain recognition as well enlisted as “Kirantis” or “Kiranti Khambu Rai.”<sup>43</sup> The movement to gain tribal status is in many ways a political maneuver to receive additional government benefits. As “Tribes”, they are “bounded ethnic communitie[s] held together by a tidy catalogue of cultural, dietary, linguistic and religious habits distinct from those help by [their] neighbors.”<sup>44</sup> This “tidy catalogue” forms another identity with “religious habits” that do not apply to other Hindus or Buddhists. Although the identity may be asserted on political grounds, it adds an interesting component to the evolution of religious life on tea plantations.

The following sections provide a brief history of each tribe and mention current religious practices that are specific to that tribal identity.

### *Tamangs*

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Schneiderman & Mark Turin, “Seeking the tribe. Ethno-politics in Darjeeling and Sikkim.” (*Himal Southasian*, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> News Correspondent, “Rais Move to Get ST Status”, *The Telegraph*. ( Calcutta: India, January 24, 2012). [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1120725/jsp/siliguri/story\\_15768148.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1120725/jsp/siliguri/story_15768148.jsp)

<sup>44</sup> Schneiderman, 2006.



*“Tamang histories are always through storytelling, you will not find it written anywhere.” –Sanjay Tamang*

The most common belief is that Tamangs originally descended from Tibet and are historically Buddhist<sup>45</sup>. The border of Tibet and Nepal used to be ruled by the Tamangs, but were defeated by the Kings of Nepal who claimed occupation of the land. The Tamangs were suppressed and forced to serve under the King who attempted to eliminate previous Buddhism by enforcing Hindu practices. These practices, like celebrating Dasain and other festivals, became incorporated into Tamang tradition. As a result many Tamangs migrated to India as a way of escaping the pressure from Nepali rule, some landing in the hill regions of Darjeeling to work on tea plantations. The Tamangs received status as a “Scheduled Tribe” in Sikkim in 2002, and continue to only be recognized in Sikkim and West Bengal as such, with no further recognition from the rest of India<sup>46</sup>.

It was hard for me to locate exactly what type of worship practices Tamangs have because most of my subjects just stated that they follow whatever their ancestors followed, and did not elaborate further. As a Tribal community, one of the main types of Tamang worship is nature worship<sup>47</sup>. Nature worship has been passed down through generations.

### *Rais*

The Rais are an ethnic group from Nepal and, similar to the Tamangs who identify as Buddhist, all of the Rais that I interviewed identify first as Hindu, but also have specific Tribal ancestral worshipping practices. Rais have yet to gain status as a Scheduled Tribe, but the movement, under the label of the “Kiranti-Khambu Rai” community, is still in the process of trying to achieve recognition. On July 24, 2012, M.S. Rai, the general secretary of the Kiranti Khambu (Rai) stated:

*“Our community has a 5,000-year-old history and the Kiranti-Khambu-Rai community has its own culture and tradition. Because of the ignorance regarding our community, our members have been enlisting themselves as Hindus in various enumerations, which is not correct. We have our own language, script, culture and religion, which is Kiranti. We appeal to all our members to enlist themselves as Kirantis during the ongoing socio-economic and caste census.”*

As the “Kiranti-Khambu Rai” movement evolves all over Darjeeling, certain locations have adopted specific ways of representing their Tribal ethnicity. One such landmark event took place for the first time this year among the Rai community in Aap Botay village of Mineral Springs. In solidarity of their Tribe, the Rai members of Aap Botay did not celebrate any Hindu festivals this year. While other Hindu’s around Mineral Springs were celebrating the *Diwali*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Suraj Tamang interview, Darjeeling, November 29, 2012.

festival this November, blasting music from their houses while eating sweets, doing puja and lighting fireworks, many, like 26 year old Basat Rai, were abstaining from the festivities that they had participated in all the years before now. Rais from Liza Hill did not abstain from the festivities. This is important to note because it shows how the evolution of religious practice varies depending on location, and is constantly changing the dynamics of religious identity.

There was one type of worship that Rais from all different villages mentioned as part of their ancestral practice. The type of worship is called *Chula* and it involves the worshipping of three stones which represent ancestral deities known as *dule deities*.<sup>48</sup> Demi Rai from Harsing village has these three stones near the fire where she cooks. In the mornings and evenings they put burning charcoal in the stones for the ancestors. She explained that once a year there is a big festival for the Rais. During this festival they kill a hen as an offering for their ancestors and then they eat it. While they are eating the pig they perform a special puja. Iran Kumar Rai from Subandura village in Mineral Springs also mentioned *Chula* and listed the same type of practices. Rais also practice nature worship.

These separate ways of worshipping that Tamangs and Rais utilize to continue the traditions of their ancestors and mention as part of the Tribal identity separate them from the Hindu or Buddhist heading that was presented to me when we first met. The individuals who identify as both show not only how the two identities are separate, but also how they have become intertwined and in a lived setting do not necessarily play two distinct roles.

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<sup>48</sup> Iran Kumar Rai interview , notes page 45

## **Glossary**

Janajati- Literally translates into people's caste

Pahadis- Literal translation to "hill people", associated with

Brahmans and Chettris – High caste, usually associated with landowners, priests, administrators, soldiers and policeman

Kami- Low caste, usually blacksmiths

Sarki- Low caste, usually leather workers

Damai- Low caste, usually tailors

Diocese: an ecclesiastical district under the jurisdiction of a bishop. (dictionary.com)

Shrine – A building or other shelter, often of a stately or sumptuous character, enclosing the remains or relics of a saint or other holy person and forming an object of religious veneration and pilgrimage.

Darjeeling Municipality – The main city area of Darjeeling District

Kurta – A traditional dress in India and Nepal

Mahakal Temple – An important pilgrimage site for both Buddhists and Hindus located in Darjeeling Municipality

Puja- The worship of a particular god

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## Suggestions for Further Research

The research I conducted attempted to cover a lot of different aspects of religious life on tea plantations. As a result, a lot of the data I collected only skimmed the surface of really deep concepts and practices. I would suggest that future research on this topic delve deeper into the specific worship practices and politics of what it means to have a Tribal Identity, and specifically the evolution of the Kiranti Khumbu Rai movement. I would also suggest future researchers to explore more in-depth what the increase in education implies for the caste system.

